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July 6, 1954

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Dear Sherman:

I attach a now somewhat ancient memo from Dick Seamon, embodying an interesting suggestion on the post mortem procedure.

On getting Dick's memo, I asked that a review be made of NIK's on Indochina over the past few years. I now have a selection of excerpts from estimates dating back to December, 1950.

If one were to call out the most prescient passages, it would make the intelligence community's views appear to have been positively clairvoyant.

In 1950, for example, we said, collectively:

"Under these circumstances there is only a slight chance that the French can ..... build up an independent Vietnamese government and an effective national army ...."

In early 1951:

"through mid-1952, the probable outlook in Indochina is one of gradual deterioration of the Franco-Vietnamese military position."

In 1952, April:

"The French have apparently come to believe that they can no longer achieve a military decision in Indochina and that the Indochina problem can only be solved within the context of some form of over-all settlement in the Far East, perhaps following the Korean War."

Mr. Sherman Kent,  
Director, Office of National Estimates,  
The Central Intelligence Agency,  
Washington, D. C.

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In June, 1953:

"The overall French Union position in Indochina ..... will probably deteriorate during the period of this estimate (thru mid-1954)."

In October, 1953:

"Should it (the Laniel-Navarre plan) fail, ..... we believe that, unless the US proves willing to contribute forces, the French will in time seek to negotiate directly with the Communists for the best possible terms."

More quotes could be found, but the pattern is clear. We saw the main factors correctly -- the failure of the Bao Dai-French political experiment, the decline of French will, the importance of Chinese aid to Viet Minh -- and we drew the correct conclusions.

It is honest to say that we were overly pessimistic about the immediate future in 1950. And in October of 1953, in NIE-99, we gave the Laniel-Navarre plan much higher marks than it deserved; and I believe we flew in the face of logic and evidence then -- I can say so, because OIR was a supporter of the erroneous (in retrospect) view.

Still and all, the record is one that needs few apologies. And it does bear out Dick's point that something can be gleaned from a post mortem on the substance of estimates. If the idea appeals to O/NK, we would be happy to collaborate in a suitably limited experiment.

Sincerely,

Director  
Office of Intelligence Research

Attach:

cc Mr. Scammon's memo to Mr. Evans,  
dtd 5-14-54.(0)

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